

The urban context of the Serapeum at Ostia

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Abstract

*This article discusses the cults of Isis and Serapis in Ostia and Portus, especially the location and urban context of the Serapeum in Ostia, and provides arguments against a supposed Oriental quarter in the neighbourhood of the sanctuary.**

The last decades have seen a fair amount of research into the Eastern cults in the harbours of Rome, and discussion on several aspects of the cults that were adopted from Egypt. A number of these cases will be critically analysed here, in the context of recent research in other fields. It is explicitly not the purpose to aim for completeness here. The known material is, by now, so substantial that it warrants extensive research, leading to a large monograph. Here, instead, I would like to pay specific attention to the location and urban contexts of the sanctuaries to Egyptian gods in Ostia and Portus.

In her work *I culti orientali ad Ostia* from 1962 Maria Floriani Squarciapino clearly outlines the state of affairs in the area of Egyptian cults in Ostia.¹ She thinks that the impulse for the founding of sanctuaries for Oriental deities in this particular place came from Rome, and not from the steady stream of mariners who came into town. The Serapeum of Ostia postdates the Iseum and Serapaeum at Rome itself, which might be used to support this claim.² Furthermore, Squarciapino argues that the cult fitted well into the urban environment of Italic towns from Hadrianic times onwards.

She further emphasises the specificity of Ostia, by arguing that the inscriptions from Ostia are mostly in Latin, whereas those from Portus are mainly Greek. Thus, the link to Egypt, c.q. Alexandria will have been stronger at the sanctuary of Portus than the one of Ostia.³ Here, she follows Russell Meiggs who, when comparing Ostia to Portus, noted that at the former: 'probably the association with Egypt was less strong'.⁴ The idea of a strong relation between the sanctuaries to Isis and Serapis at Ostia and Rome would fit the pattern which recent comparative research between Ostia and Rome has established, of a harbour town strongly connected to the imperial capital.⁵ Even though this is an attractive view, one should be cautious before overstating the case. Research

taking into account all relevant types of sources is a prerequisite before making any further claims.

In his recent study *Kult und Alltag in römischen Hafenstädten* (2004) Dirk Steuernagel has done worthwhile suggestions regarding the cults of Egyptian deities in Ostia.⁶

Inscriptions and sculptures seem to indicate that both Ostia and Portus had an Iseum, although, to this day, no temple of Isis has been found.⁷ One inscription from Portus explicitly mentions a restoration of an *aedem ac porticus deae Isidis*, in the 70s of the 4th century.⁸ Serapis too seems to have had sanctuaries dedicated to him in both towns. Inscriptions (especially Vidman 1969, 257-258 no 556, dated to 222-226 A.D.) suggest a Serapeum at Portus. Both for that sanctuary and for the Portus Iseum a location on the Isola Sacra has been suggested, directly south of the estuary of the Trajanic canal.⁹

At Ostia, the cult of Isis is usually considered to be older than the cult of Serapis.¹⁰ Through the Augustan tomb no 18 along the Via Laurentina the existence of a local Isis cult is even dated to Augustan times.¹¹ It is, however, questionable whether one can base the argument for a cult building on only one tomb depicting Isis or an Isis-priestess.¹² In fact, one has to come to the conclusion that currently known sources give too little information about pre-2nd century AD buildings, relating to the cult of Isis and Serapis at Ostia. From the 2nd century onwards, the image changes completely. The vast majority of inscriptions that relate to the cult of both Egyptian deities can be dated to the 2nd and 3rd century. This may well be linked to the expansive growth of both towns following the construction of Trajan's harbour, and the ensuing influx of people from all corners of the empire, including Egypt.¹³

Considerable popularity of Egyptian deities among the inhabitants of the seaports is furthermore supported by many findings of statues and statuettes in private contexts.¹⁴



Fig. 1. Ostia Antica, remains of the Serapeum (photo: author).



Fig. 2. Ostia Antica, Caseggiato del Serapide, Sacellum of Serapis (photo: author).

This is not surprising, since the gods were assimilated into the Roman pantheon from the 2nd century AD onwards.

In modern literature on the cults of Isis and Serapis in the seaports of Rome, emphasis inevitably lies on the Serapeum of Ostia (III xvii 4), the only monumental sanctuary for one of the Egyptian gods that has been found in either this city or Portus to this day (*fig. 1*).¹⁵ The excavator, Guido Calza, found, among other evidence, the inscription IOVI SERAPI, placing the identification of the building as a Serapeum beyond reasonable doubt.¹⁶ Katharina Rieger has, nonetheless, chosen not to incorporate the building in her recent study on sanctuaries in Ostia, since she considers it to have been semi-public, unfortunately without explaining this qualification.¹⁷ To my mind, there is not enough evidence to answer the question on the status of the Serapeum of Ostia as a public, semi-public, or private building.

According to Calza, the whole quarter of the Serapeum was strongly influenced by Egyptian mariners.¹⁸ Various scholars have pursued the point, even seeing the building and its direct surrounding area, on the north side of the city, as the seat of a religious *collegium* of worshippers. Some of these scholars go so far as to call the wider surrounding area, because of the *aegyptiaca* that have been found there, an Oriental quarter,¹⁹ and therefore inhabited by orientals.²⁰ It seems fairly self evident that supporters of the Serapis cult lived in the vicinity of the Serapeum. Arguing, on that basis, in favour of an Oriental quarter is pushing the evidence too far.²¹ One of the points that needs to be looked at first is chronology: it ought to be analysed to what extent finds can be dated to similar or different periods, taking location in consideration as well. In the way in which the material is often presented nowadays, it seems as if buildings and finds all originate at the same moment, and have continuously existed alongside one another. For instance, the *sacellum* with a stucco depiction of Serapis, which gave name to the Caseggiato del Serapide, is often used as support for an 'Oriental quarter' (*fig. 2*). This Caseggiato is a residence that forms one block with the Caseggiato degli Aurighi and the Terme dei Sette Sapienti, two *insulae* away from the Serapeum.²² The *sacellum* in question, however, was a private initiative by a limited number of inhabitants of both residences, together with some surrounding users and employees of the bathcomplex, of which the *sacellum* forms part of the monumental entrance.²³ My own research has shown that the *sacellum* should be dated to between AD 205 and

209, which gives its origin a completely different context than that of the Serapeum.²⁴ The latter is certainly Hadrianic, as it was initiated by Caltilius P..., a probable freedman, on the 24th of January 127, the emperor's birthday, as the *Fasti Ostienses* indicate.²⁵ The just discussed *sacellum* depicting Serapis was a private dedication, made during the reign of an emperor whose affinity to this deity is well known and need not show any eastern roots, especially since under the Severi the Serapiscult had become a general Roman cult.²⁶ We have to conclude that there are no indications for a relation between the Serapeum and this *insula* for the period between 127 and 205, and that though in 205 or shortly after a *sacellum* was created for the Egyptian god in *Insula III x*, the impulse for this need not have come from the Serapeum, taking into account the widespread popularity of Serapis in this period. Of the other finds relating to the cult of Serapis in the neighbourhood, Steuernagel (2004, 214) has rightly suggested that they originally were part of the Serapeum itself.

Now that it appears that the presumed Oriental quarter in the wider area surrounding the Serapeum cannot be supported with sufficient evidence, it may be worth while to look in greater detail at the direct vicinity of the Serapeum. There is certainly a relationship between the Serapeum and at least one of the two adjacent residential areas.²⁷ At any rate, for a limited period of time, in which they had an open connection to one another. Ricardo Mar, furthermore, presumes a link with the Terme della Trinacria.²⁸ He argues that the unity is obvious from the fact that both buildings were constructed as one whole in seven years (123-131). Against this argument one should point out that more complexes in the wide area were built in the same years, as is clear, for instance, from the first building phase of the just discussed *Insula III x*, for which there is no evidence for a link to Serapis at the time of construction.

Whether, furthermore, the religious *collegium*, linked to Serapis, was also in charge of the thermal complex and the *horrea* that were located in the same block where the Serapeum is located, as Mar argues, is questionable.²⁹ Apart from proximity of these buildings to one another, and, to a certain extent, the way they were oriented towards each other, Mar provides few convincing arguments. This has recently also been recognised by Egelhaaf-Gaiser and Rieger.³⁰ In terms of bath complexes, the Terme della Trinacria are fully comparable to other *balnea* in Ostia, which were consistently placed near, or in between, living res-

idences, and were often closely connected to them. These baths had primarily a function for their direct living environment, and are not to be connected to adjacent temples or cults - as Mar has argued in various places.

Here, and also elsewhere, Mar makes a wrongful comparison to the *insulae* I XIV en XV, of which the first contains some living residences, constructed around and above the so-called Baths of Buticosus, and the second four originally Republican sanctuaries, dedicated among others to Hercules. Even though, as Mar rightly points out, both water supply and drainage of the bath complex are concentrated in the temple complex, there is still no reason to assume a relationship between baths and temples - apart from being located in the same block. In fact, it appears that the temple complex lost space to the bathhouses, especially for service quarters and water management, thus losing importance when the *balneum* was constructed in Trajanic times. Since new storeys were rapidly constructed over this *balneum*, in the early Antonine period, it would appear that the erection of bath and living spaces should be linked to the extreme population growth of the town in the 2nd century AD, rather than being related to the cult of Hercules. On the contrary, there are indications for a lessening of importance of the Hercules temple: during the mentioned changes in the *insula*, part of the temple podium disappeared underground, and the terrain surrounding the temple was filled with facilities to accommodate the water management of the bath complex.

Likewise, the *insula* incorporating the Serapeum should not be seen as exceptional: the bath complex had the same local function within the block as comparable complexes in many other *insulae* within the town. The Serapeum, thus, occupied a position which was little different from that of sanctuaries to the traditional Roman gods in the living areas of the ever more densely built town of Ostia.

The final point that I want to raise in this contribution is the position of the Serapeum in Ostia as a whole. Carlo Pavolini contends that, with the exception of the cult of Mithras, Oriental cults were practised only in the peripheral areas of the town.³¹ For the Serapeum, however, the opposite is true: since Ostia and its centre bordered on the Tiber, the Serapeum which was located near the riverbank must not be regarded as a peripheral building, but one in the vicinity of the centre, only about 375 m removed from the town's forum. Recent prospection research of the German Archaeological Institute in Rome, led by Michael Heinzel-

mann, furthermore, shows that 2nd-century-AD Ostia had a *trastevere* which occupied several hundreds of meters north of the Tiber.³² That suggests that, at that time, the northern periphery of the town should be located there, and not in the area directly south of the Tiber. From that point of view, the Serapeum of Ostia can certainly be considered as a building at the border of the town centre. It was not a peripheral building, underlining the deity's importance in the town.

NOTES

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¹ Floriani Squarciapino 1962, 19-36 (Ch. II).

² Floriani Squarciapino 1962, VII.

³ Cfr. Bakker 1994, 216.

⁴ She follows the first edition of Meiggs from 1959, repeated in the second edition, Meiggs 1973, 368. L. Ross Taylor 1912, 67 has expressed the following opinion: 'A Sarapeum was established at Portus by Alexandrians, and modelled after the great sanctuary of the god at Alexandria.' It is however not clear on which arguments he has based this opinion.

⁵ See on this the introduction and several contributions in Bruun/Gallina Zevi 2002.

⁶ Especially Steuernagel 2004, 92-94 and 212-227.

⁷ See for the inscription on Egyptian gods: Vidman 1969, 244-254, nos 532-549 (Ostia) and id. 254-260, nos 550-562 (Portus); slightly more recent is Malaise 1972A, *passim*; Malaise 2004. See for the dating of no 556 also Vidman 1970, 59. See for an overview of monuments for Serapis in Ostia and Portus: Kater-Sibbes 1973, 101-105. This overview is however very brief and incomplete. Much more complete on Isis and Serapis and with references is Bricault 2001, 154-157.

⁸ Vidman 1969, 260 no 562. Cfr. also Vidman 1970, 161; 1971, 207; Chastagnol 1969, 135-144: 'architrave de l'Iséum de Porto'. As for the inscriptions I refer to Vidman 1969 and not to Thylander 1952 because the last collection is far from complete.

⁹ See for Isis and Serapis in Ostia also Ross Taylor 1912, 73-75 and Meiggs 1973, 366-370. Floriani Squarciapino 1962, 28 mentions two possible locations for the Ostian Iseum: near the Capitolium or near the Palazzo Imperiale. The author prefers the second possibility because *CIL* XIV 4291 was found near the Navalvia which is not far from the Palazzo Imperiale. Zevi 1997, 322-323 (with references to earlier literature) proposes to identify architectural remains on the Isola Sacra, unearthed near the place where Trajan's canal discharged into the sea, as remnants of an Iseum, in this case belonging to Portus. Cfr. also Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 216-217; Rieger 2004, 25 note 67. The Serapeum of Portus can also have been located on the Isola Sacra, judging by two inscriptions, one in Greek and one in Latin, both dedications by Titus Aelius Felicissimus to Serapis, cfr. Moretti 1975-1976, 315-319 and Malaise 2004, 25, 16a and 16b. See also Lazzarini 1996, 243-247 who supports this proposition of a Serapeum on the basis of a recently found inscription.

¹⁰ Morovich 1991 suggests that the Serapeum in Ostia has had an Iseum as predecessor. This has been rightly

enfeebled by Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 200 because of the lack of any indication.

- ¹¹ See recently Steuernagel 2004, 220-221.
- ¹² One has pointed to a representation of amongst others two Apis bulls in combination with *CIL* XIV 1044 dating from the 1st century AD. Cfr. Vidman 1969, 244-245, no 532 and Vidman 1970, 108. On a Neronian-Flavian altar in the Lateran collection of the Vatican Museums (inv. 10762) with inscription (*CIL* XIV 429 = Vidman 1969, 252, no 543) one *L. Valerius Fyrmus ... sacerdos Isidis Ostens(is)* is mentioned, but again an explicit reference to a specific building is lacking. For a description with bibliography see Sinn 1991, 70-71 no 37. See also Meiggs 1973, 366.
- ¹³ Cfr. Malaise 1972a, 104, 133, 165, 327 and 470; Shepherd 1997, 324. See for Ostian *Aegyptiaca* excavated in public contexts in Ostia and Portus Floriani Squarciapino 1962, 25-27.
- ¹⁴ Floriani Squarciapino 1962, 34-35; Malaise 1972, 83-89, nos 96-123; Bakker 1994, *passim*.
- ¹⁵ The temple, excavated in the Thirties of the 20th century, was first published by Calza 1953, 138. After that, many others have described the building. In her recent overview of sanctuaries in Ostia it is mentioned only briefly by Rieger 2001, 247. For recent descriptions of the temple see Malaise 1972, 78-79; Bakker 1994, 367-368; Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 201-204.
- ¹⁶ Cfr. Vidman 1969, 245 no 533.
- ¹⁷ Rieger 2004, 32 note 138 and 215, note 1021.
- ¹⁸ Calza 1953, 138. See also Hermansen 1982, 83 who writes about 'strong oriental influence'.
- ¹⁹ For instance Mar 1992, 36-46; Mar 1996, 150. The *Aegyptiaca* found in the neighborhood of the Serapeum are described by Malaise 1972, 79-81, nos 67-77.
- ²⁰ Pavolini 1989, 132; Shepherd 1997; contra: Bakker 1994, 192 and Versluys 2002, 47.
- ²¹ Cfr. Steuernagel 2004, 214, especially note 1084.
- ²² In her catalogue of monuments for Serapis Kater-Sibbes 1973, 101, no 544 and 545 includes both the Caseggiato del Serapide and the stucco representation of the god. This, of course, is not correct: the modern name of the first derives from the second monument and cannot therefore be taken as an independent Serapis monument. Bakker 1994, 89, 93, 226 (Cat. A 53) has found the outlines of representations of Isis Fortuna (left) and Isis (right) in the side panels of the sacellum. See also Mols 1999, 263-265 (stucco image of Serapis) and 364 (on date) and Steuernagel 2004, 94; 226 and Tafel 2.2.
- ²³ Cfr. Ook Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 213.
- ²⁴ Mols 1999, esp. 363-364.
- ²⁵ See for this inscription Vidman 1957, 21; Malaise 1972, 71-72 no 18; id. 1972a, 123 (wrongly 123 A.D. is given as the year of dedication), 421 (with correct year); Morovich 1991. The dedication on this date is rightly to be seen as an intentional declaration of loyalty to the emperor as has been proposed by Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 206. It is however slightly overdone to consider it an 'Einbindung des Kaiserkultes'. Attractive but difficult to demonstrate is the idea regarding the cult of Isis suggested by Gallo 1997, 290: 'Sembra che l'introduzione di questo culto "esotico" sia stata favorita e promossa proprio da ricche famiglie di mercanti, legate da più generazioni all'Oriente e alle coste del Mediterraneo dai traffici marittimi.'
- ²⁶ Contra Shepherd 1997, 324.
- ²⁷ Pavolini 1989, 128-129 considers this certainly the case for the Domus presso il Serapeo (III xvii 3) and maybe

for the Caseggiato di Bacco e Arianna. Floriani Squarciapino (1962, 21) sees a relationship with III xvii 2, 3 and 5 ('erano probabilmente destinati a cerimonie del culto e ad abitazione dei ministri di esso.'). Cfr. also Steuernagel 2004, 220.

- ²⁸ Mar 1996, 136. Suggestions in the same direction have been done by Floriani Squarciapino 1962, 21.
- ²⁹ Mar 1992, 37-46, 48. See about this *collegium* also Hermansen 1982, 66-67.
- ³⁰ Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 208-212; Rieger 2004, 125.
- ³¹ Pavolini 1989, 127-12; see also recently Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 200.
- ³² Cfr. Heinzelmann 2002, especially 106-107. In Abb. 1 in grey, the city area in the Second century A.D. has been marked. In the South and East buildings go beyond the city walls even more than is the case with the Tiber in the north.

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